

Mitigation Package for Abidemi Ganiyu Rufai

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Social History

Abidemi Ganiyu Rufai was born on Nov. 6, 1976 in the Ogun state of Nigeria.

His father, Ayodele Rufai, was a businessman. He ran the Mayodele Trading Co., a poultry farm that Abidemi said processed 100,000 chickens a year.

Abidemi's father was a Muslim man who had five wives and 13 children.

Abidemi was the 10th child, and the first born to his father's third wife, a young woman named Lola.

Abidemi's mother was 20 when he was born. She left the family when Abidemi was a baby, and he had no memory of her. He thought his father's first wife was his birth mother.

Although he may not have remembered losing his birth mother, it still affected his development. Psychological research has found long-lasting effects for children who are separated from their parents. The mother-child attachment bond begins when fetuses are still in the womb. Even early maternal separation can result in anxiousness. ¹

Abidemi said his father usually had three wives and their children living in the home at any time.

Each wife took care of the children she had birthed.

"Each wife want their children to be successful, more than this one," Abidemi said, explaining the family dynamic.

After Abidemi's birth mother left, she married a different man and raised two children with him.

Abidemi met his birth mother for the first time when he was 17. Their conversation was short: about an hour. She had come to see how he was. Abidemi was standoffish. He told her he was fine.

It wasn't until after his father died that he met his mother again and she tearfully told him why she'd left him.

Abidemi was raised by his father's first wife, Olabisi. She'd had eight children.

In addition to his father, wives and his siblings, Abidemi said there were usually cousins living at the home as well.

¹ Hofer, 2006 and Pascuzzo, K. & others, 2015.

Abidemi said Olabisi was nice to him, but neither of his parents were affectionate.

No one told him they loved him, and their style of discipline was severe. He said both his parents beat him.

His father also yelled at his wives. Everyone was afraid of him.

Once, when Abidemi was 15 or 16, he had to go to the hospital after a particularly harsh beating.

He'd gone out with his friends without his father's consent. While he was gone, he missed a teacher who had come to instruct the children.

When he returned, his father told him to go to bed. After he got into his bed, his father beat him in the head with a cane.

"Blood came out, and I had a fracture in my head," Abidemi said.

His father had a driver take him to the hospital. He never got in trouble with the police.

When asked if his father ever told him he was sorry, Abidemi scoffed. "Hell no," he said.

Abidemi's older brother, Idowu Rufai, confirmed the harsh discipline in their family. He said parents in the United States talk, while parents in Nigeria *beat*. In addition to the physical abuse Abidemi suffered, his memories raise a question about neglect.

Abidemi went to boarding school when he was five or six years old.

"I was crying every time," he said. "I was too young."

Abidemi liked school, apart from not wanting to be away from his home. He said he did well, and his best subject was English.

Although the boarding school was only a 30-minute drive from his house, his parents visited him twice during each months-long term.

He said in primary school, teachers would beat students when they did something wrong. In secondary school, students still got beat but also had work assigned as punishment.

When Abidemi was home from school, his father made him work for the business.

He said his father was busy with his business, and his wives all had their own businesses. There were no nannies; One of his sisters usually cooked dinner.

When Abidemi was about 14, he had his appendix removed and spent two months in the hospital.

Abidemi ^{said} he got along well with his siblings and their mothers.

"I had a good relationship with everybody," he said, "but I don't know if they had a good relationship with me."

His lack of knowledge of his family members' feelings about him may be an effect of the dysfunction in his childhood.

Research on the psychological impacts of women and children who live in a polygamous families has shown that children often experience physical and emotional abuse associated with parental neglect and abuse.²

Women in polygamous marriages tend to be more depressed, and have higher levels of obsessive-compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity, anxiety, hostility, phobia, paranoia and psychosis than monogamous women.

First wives in particular tend to face psychological, physical and social problems among the other wives.

Studies found that children in polygamous families have a higher risk of family dysfunction and even had lower school scores than children in monogamous families.³

Also, children in polygamous families tend to perceive their parents' marriages as having made the family's economic situation and family functioning worse.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

² Rose & Siti, 2020.

³ Bahari, Ismail Shaiful and others. 2021.

Children with repeated traumas (called Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs) develop a “prolonged stress response” that inhibits the development of the brain and increases the risk of negative outcomes throughout their lives.⁴

The first study to identify that ACEs have lifelong affect on people’s health was published in 1998 by Kaiser Permanente.⁵ Researchers identified seven categories of ACEs that negatively impacted people’s longterm health:

- **Repeated psychological abuse in the household**
- **Repeated physical Abuse in the household**
- **Sexual Abuse**
- **Substance Abuse (alcohol or street drugs) in the household**
- **Mental Illness in the household**
- **Seeing your mother or stepmother treated violently**
- **Criminal behavior by someone in the household**

Later studies have identified Seven Expanded ACEs⁶:

- **Discrimination**
- **Witnessing violence in the community**
- **Feeling unsafe in your neighborhood**
- **Being bullied**
- **Racism**
- **Poverty**
- **Being in Foster Care**

Abidemi reported experiencing four of the original seven and three of the expanded seven ACEs.

The more ACEs someone has experienced, the more problems they will have throughout their lives. Kaiser Permanente’s participants who had experienced four or more of the ACE categories (compared to those who had

⁴ Cprek & others, 2019.

⁵ Felitti & other, 1998.

⁶ Cronholm & others, 2015.

experienced none) were 4-12 times more likely to suffer from alcoholism, drug abuse, depression and suicide attempt; 2-4 times more likely to smoke, rate their health as poor, have 50 or more sex partners and have sexually transmitted disease; and 1.4 - 1.6 times more likely to be physically inactive or severely obese.

Very few people have had as much trauma during their childhood as Abidemi suffered. Although 52% of Kaiser Permanente participants reported having experienced one or more of the categories (most often having had drug use or alcoholism in the household), only 6.2 % had experienced four or more.

Researchers believe the reason high levels of childhood trauma tends to lead to heart and lung disease is people are desperate to soothe the anxiety, anger and depression those traumas created. They often reach for the easiest coping tools: drugs, alcohol and risky behavior.

College and Career

Abidemi's father died in 1999, and he was admitted to Ogun State University in 2000.

Abidemi had to borrow money from friends and relatives to finish school. He studied Industrial and Labor relations, and graduated in 2006. In 2012, he said, he received a Master's degree in Human Relations Management. He wanted to set up a business himself, but it was too hard and he decided to work for a family business.

Abidemi said Nigerians know that even as a college graduate, it could take 10 years to find a job and the job that he finally could get would likely not feed him, let alone allow him to support a family.

Joblessness is not new in the country. A report published in 2021 by the National Bureau of Statistics noted that Nigeria's unemployment rate had risen from 27.1 percent in the second quarter of 2020 to 33 percent in the first quarter of 2021. It was the second highest unemployment rate of the list of countries

Bloomberg follows. The country's jobless rate had quadrupled from 2016 to 2021, as the economy went through two recessions, according to Bloomberg News.⁷

It was Abidemi's relationship with his mother and maternal grandmother that allowed him to start a career.

Although he had not felt a connection to his birth mother when he met her, Abidemi met and grew attached to his maternal grandmother, Rebecca Kuyoro. She told him to make peace with his mother so he could manage her business.

Abidemi did that, and helped his mother diversify into farming when she was having trouble buying materials because of border closures and smuggling.

They started a farm and then went into real estate. Abidemi took some money and opened a gambling company, but it was a flop and his mother was upset.

Abidemi said his father had been popular in Ogun, and he was popular, too.

In 2010, he started traveling regularly to the United States and friends advised him to start an education foundation. In 2013, he started the Mayodele Education Foundation (named in honor of his father) to help send poor children to school.

Gambling Addiction

When Abidemi went to University, he developed a gambling addiction.

He started playing dice with other young men in the house where they lived at the university. When he finished school he started going to casinos.

"The gambling got into me," he said. "If you gamble, you want money all the time."

A study published in 2021 by University of Colorado Boulder researchers showed that genetic risk, combined with with an individual's mental health and how often the person gambled, determines whether gambling would become a problem.

The study also found that people who engaged in luck-based gambling activities such as dice, betting on slot machines and buying lottery tickets were

⁷ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-15/nigeria-unemployment-rate-rises-to-second-highest-on-global-list>

more likely to develop a problem than gambling associated with a perceived element of skill such as day trading or playing pool for money.⁸

In 2017, international researchers reported that gambling addiction triggers the same pathways in the brain as drug and alcohol cravings.

Abidemi went to six months of therapy for his gambling addiction in 2014. He said the counseling sessions helped, but haven't eradicated his addiction.

Even in detention, Abidemi said he sometimes feels an urge to bet his food on sports games he watches with others on the television in the detention center's day room.

Nigeria's culture of corruption

To understand Abidemi Rufai's actions, it may be helpful to understand Nigeria's culture of governmental corruption. While it in no way excuses his actions, it can put them into context.

Nigeria is a country notorious for government corruption and worldwide email scams offering large financial payouts for fees. The email cons – called 419 scams after the section of the Nigerian criminal code targeting fraud – started long before email but exploded worldwide when Nigerian's economy crashed with global oil prices.⁹

In 2014, a Silicon Valley security firm issued a report concluding a series of cyberattacks on businesses had originated in Nigeria and were being orchestrated by con artists behind 419 scams. The attacks began with emails that included malicious attachments that could take over devices without being detected by antivirus products.¹⁰

Nigeria is one of the biggest oil producers in the world but is a country long plagued by leaders who vow to clean up corruption without making progress.

⁸ Edwards, N. 2021

⁹ Engber, 2014.

¹⁰ Perloth, 2014.

When the current President, Muhammadu Buhari took over Nigeria's government in May 2015, he promised to overhaul theft of government funds.¹¹

Investigations of graft found that for years, officials had been openly diverting government funds for their own use had left most Nigerian citizens without basic needs met. Fraud in the privatization of power utility left most Nigerians without electricity. Money meant to purchase arms for the Army's fight against terrorist group Boko Haram had vanished.

Billions of dollars had been stolen from the country's oil revenues, leaving many of the country's states bankrupt or near bankrupt. After the governor of the Nigerian Central Bank reported the missing revenues in 2014, he was dismissed from his position.

The Nigerian justice system has historically failed to punish those who were caught.

The U.S. Justice Department won a forfeiture judgment in 2012 against Nigerian leader Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, who'd embezzled millions of money from the oil ministry and spent it on homes around the world. amassed millions of dollars in property and bank accounts worldwide (including in California).¹²

Although Alamieyeseigha pleaded guilty in 2007 to failing to declare his assets and was sentenced to two years in prison, he served just one day and was pardoned by then-president Goodluck Jonathan, who'd been his deputy.¹³

The lesson for young Nigerians seemed to be that corruption is a part of life and leaders' promises to clean up theft within government are usually empty.

The government and business elite enjoy most of the country's riches while regular people live in poverty.

The Encyclopedia Britannica states that Nigeria's urban concentration creates enormous sanitation problems: improper sewage disposal, water shortages and poor drainage. Trash heaps on narrow streets causes traffic jams and dumping along stream

¹¹ Onishi, 2015.

¹² Roberts, 2015.

¹³ Roberts, 2015.

beds means health hazards and has created floods that plague many cities. Domestic water supplies are often polluted by pit latrines. Lower respiratory infections and diarrheal diseases are among the leading causes of death.

Unsafe Nation

“Nigeria, as a country, has never been safe,” Abidemi said. “Crime, war, ethnic war.”

Throughout Abidemi’s life, he said Nigeria was at war or being run by military regimes.

The Civil War of the 1960’s was technically over by the time he was born, but it has been far from peaceful since then. In early 1976, when Abidemi was a baby, Nigeria’s president was assassinated. The military seized control at the end of 1983 and Nigeria remained under military rule until 1999.

Even after Nigeria became a democracy in 1999, the country has been marred by ethnic conflicts, violent protests ending in military interventions and terrorism.

Massive irregularities and violence during the 2007 and 2011 presidential elections led to widespread riots.¹⁴

International election observers condemned the election in 2007 because of voting irregularities and fraud.

He said even now, although Nigeria is a Democracy, there are kidnappings and Islamic terrorists.

A travel advisory¹⁵ issued in April 2022 by the U.S. Department of State recommended that Americans reconsider traveling to Nigeria due to “crime, terrorism, civil unrest, kidnapping and maritime crime.”

The advisory says throughout Nigeria, violent crime such as armed robberies, assault, carjackings, kidnappings, hostage-taking, banditry and rape are common. Terrorists attack shopping centers, hotels, markets, schools and government

¹⁴ Daxecker, 2019.

¹⁵ <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/nigeria-travel-advisory.html>

installations without warning. Parts of Southern Nigeria have civil unrest and low-level armed militancy. Violence flares between communities of farmers and herders in rural areas.

The Islamic sectarian movement Boko Haram threatened the country's peace by its attacks on police and government, and even schools and churches. Although the group was founded in 2002, it didn't become widely known until 2009 when it began attacking police in 2009. Boko Haram was in the international spotlight in 2015 when it kidnapped more than 275 girls from a boarding school in the Borno state.

Family and Community

Abidemi met his wife, Milian, while attending Ogun State University, and they married in 2014. She started working in 2015 but amid worries that she hadn't gotten pregnant, stopped working in 2016.

They have two sons: 5 and 2 years old.

Their first son, Zahedan Ayoola Rufai, is an American citizen. He was born in New York 2017.

Abidemi said he is proud of his son's school reports. "The school said he is so respectful," he said. "He bows down when he is greeting people. That makes me happy."

Abidemi and Miliani were in the process of adopting two daughters when he was charged in this case. His wife put the adoption on hold, but they hope they can still adopt the girls when Abidemi returns to Nigeria.

Abidemi is parenting his sons much differently than he was parented. He said he and his wife do not discipline the boys physically the way Abidemi's parents. He said he would never beat his children the way he was beaten as a child.

He also does his best to let the boys know they are loved. His parents never said they loved him, but he tells his sons he loves them all the time.

Questionable Political practices

Nigeria's widespread corruption moved him to go into politics. Abidemi ran for congress in 2019, but he lost. He said to get people to vote for you, you have to pay them.

"Almost everything in Nigeria is corrupt," he said.

He said more than 100 million of Nigeria's 206 million population live in abject poverty.

He wasted a lot of money on the election and his mother was sad about their financial situation.

Prior to that, he'd been giving elderly citizens food during the Christmas season. He bought a new water system for a prison in his town.

"I was so desperate," he said. "I saw the opportunity with the government paying people COVID money."

During the election, though, he met – and impressed – Dapo Abiodun. Abiodun, a former director of a petroleum company, was elected governor of Ogun State in 2019. He hired Abidemi to be his Special Assistant.

Although Abidemi was paid a yearly salary equivalent to about \$2,000 for his official work, he made about \$50,000 introducing people to the governor.

The future

Abidemi Rufai is deeply sorry for what he did.

"I know I made a mistake," he said.

He misses his children and wife.

"At this age, this is when they need me the most," he said.

"Right now, my family is lacking financially," he said.

Abidemi's mother, who suffers from chronic hypertension, has been helping Abidemi's wife with the children. Friends have helped them with expenses.

"I want to take care of my responsibilities and give my children the best education that they deserve," he said.

His older son was just admitted to primary school.

He said he wants to go back to Nigeria.

"I feel so remorseful, and I feel so sorry," he said.

He has learned his lesson.

"No matter what you are going through, it doesn't give you the right to steal."

He said being charged with a crime and being imprisoned has been one of the most devastating experiences of his life. He has promised himself he will never put himself in this situation again.

"I've missed the time I've lost with my kids," he said. "I believe I have a better future. I just want to go back and concentrate on my life. I'm going to be 46 this year. The life expectancy in Nigeria is 55 years old. I just want to make the best of my time: be a good father to my kids, and be a good husband to my wife."

He also wants to take care of his mother.

"That's my plan for the my future," he said.

Idowu said he was shocked when he learned of Abidemi's arrest. Idowu is 11 years older than Abidemi, and lives in Odenton, Maryland where he manages a drug store.

He said Abidemi is embarrassed by what he has done and has apologized to everyone in the family.

Idowu said he has always known Abidemi to be a humble person who wants to help people.

"Abidemi is a nice person," he said. "The whole town missed him."

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